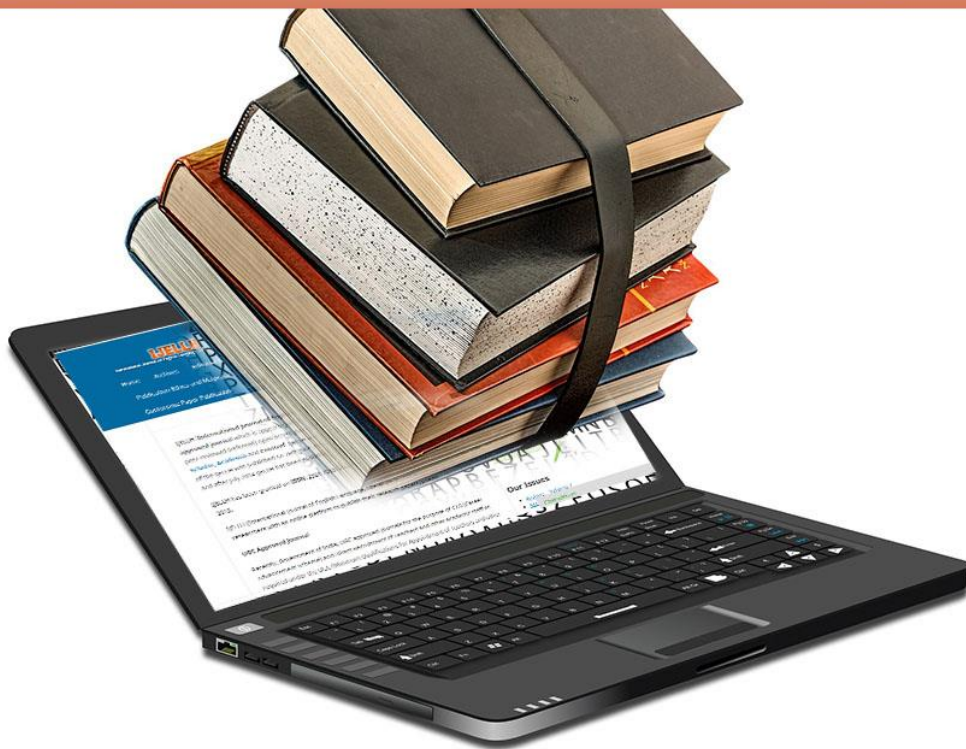


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Moral Panic in a Post-anthropocentric World: A Posthumanist Reading of Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

Abstract

The expanding global economy has decentred the primacy of human beings through the commodification of all life forms and a strategic classification on the basis of their utility. Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go* attempts to transcend the traditional definition of personhood by raising certain pertinent bioethical questions through the rehumanization of cloned life. It tries to look into the perfectibility of life by tracing the progression from biocentrism to anthropocentrism, and posthumanism. The moral panic encountered as anthropocentrism is challenged through the introduction of uncategorisable and advanced life forms is due to the trespassing of boundaries between species, and the recognition of emerging 'non-human' life with enhanced cognitive abilities. Thus, I attempt to study the moral panic in *Never Let Me Go* due to the displacement of the traditional hierarchic supremacy of human beings, bioethical dilemmas regarding the inhumane treatment meted out to the clones, and the consequent attempts to evade the moral and ethical obligations behind the creation of artificially engineered life forms.

Keywords: Moral Panic, Bioethics, Posthumanism, Rehumanization

The attempts to radically redefine the conventional definitions of ‘human ’ through the skilful delineation of the boundaries between the human and the non human signals the shift towards post-anthropocentrism. Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* explores the moral panic emanating from the heightened awareness that moral responsibility is intertwined with intellectual responsibility and the blurring of the boundaries between human beings and clones, that rival human beings through their ability to emote appropriately and to rationally comprehend reality. The interdependence between human life and the technologically mediated forms of life like the clones, as shown in the novel, challenges the fabricated tale of human independence. The increased awareness about the infringement upon the autonomy of other forms of life coupled with the bioethical scruples regarding the creation of clones that are given only a utilitarian value justifies the moral panic experienced by the human characters in Ishiguro’s novel.

The clones in the novel become the homosacres created by indiscriminate technological progress as they are reduced to dispensable life that is devoid of ‘zoe’(Agamben 87). The moral panic felt by Miss Emily and Mary Claude prompts them to ‘rehumanize’ the clones by exhibiting the consciousness and cognitive capacities of the clones (Nayar128). The entanglement of human and non-human life leads to the realisation that “humans are parts of a constellation of beings, things, events, concepts and signs”(Wheeler 30). The recognition that human life is highly contingent upon non-human existence is echoed in Ishiguro’s novel as the clones are asked to take adequate health care. Miss Lucy, a guardian in Hailsham, tells the clones that “You’re special. So keeping yourself well, keeping yourself very healthy inside, that’s much more important for each of you that it is for me” (Ishiguro,34). The disquieting proximity of the clones to the world inhabited by

human beings and the unavoidability of shared spaces between human beings and clones lead to the revulsion among some guardians as they encounter the human clones.

Even when the clones like Tommy, Ruth and Kathy have to conform to the demeaning and exploitative terms put forward by human beings, the acceptance of a sense of “shared vulnerability” triggers a genuine concern regarding the plight of the clones (Nayar 209). The moral anguish that troubles Miss Emily and Madame due to the shift from anthropocentrism to post-anthropocentrism becomes evident through their relentless attempts to validate the presence of souls in clones in order to ameliorate their existence suggest an unprecedented concern for the “companion species” (Harraway 7). While being questioned by Kathy and Tommy, Miss Emily says that they took away the art works of the clones as they “thought it would reveal your souls” (124).

As Cary Wolf observes in *What is Posthumanism*, “the unnerving weight and gravity of our moral responsibility” towards other life forms discernible in the novel of Miss Emily and Madame voiced their anguish against the unscrupulous way in which the clones were treated (69). They voiced their discontent against the inhumane treatment received by the clones that are created to facilitate human life. The heightened awareness of the physical and cognitive dependence of man on other life forms was instrumental in interrogating the moral depravity of the human race due to the revelation that “human uniqueness is a myth” (Nayar 4).

The helplessness of the clones due to the lack of autonomy and the consequent bioethical questions that it trigger is revealed through Miss Emily’s words as she says that the people started considering whether the clones “should have been brought into existence at all” as they were unsettled when they realised how the clones were “reared” (125). Thus the making of enhanced humans who will have to lead a precarious existence without any rights and autonomy poses serious moral and ethical dilemmas. The “sympathetic

imagination ” that helps human beings to envisage the choicelessness and helplessness of the clones turn the guardians of Hailsham into advocates for the rights of the clones(Nussbaum 355). The consequent moral responsibility entrusted on the human beings, who act as “moral agents”, in order to safeguard the clones that are deemed as the “moral subjects” becomes palpable through the endeavours of Miss Emily and Marie Claude to ensure a more sustainable and accommodating environment(Wolfe 58).

The shocking revelations regarding the inadequacies of being human destabilised and challenged the primacy of human beings. The cohabitation of human beings, who receive organs from the clones, and the clones, that are modelled on human beings, shows not only the interchangeability of their positions but also at the “bioegalitarian turn” that tries to move beyond the limiting inter-species boundaries (Braidotti 526). The interconnectedness between various life forms is manifested in the novel through the attempts to “rehumanize” the clones to prove that their interiority is as sacred as that of the human beings (Nayar 128). The depiction of the clones as reasoning beings who are able to fully comprehend their thought processes suggests the failure of categorical distinctions. Despite this, the persistence of inequality becomes obvious through the callous treatment received by the clones as they are forced to adhere to a “docility-utility” relationship (Foucault 137).

The secrecy that shrouds the origin of the clones, the uncertainty regarding the “donations”, the lack of individual agency in averting predetermined death in spite of the human dependency upon the clones for preserving and prolonging the human species make them the “outcasts of modernity” as they are the unavoidable by-products of technological development(Baumann 55). Hence, the exploitative relations, that harness and utilise the clone’s body without any ethical obligations, are shown through the disquietude felt by Madame on seeing Kathy dancing to the song *Never Let Me Go*, holding a pillow in her hand as if it were a baby. The sexually active, yet non-reproductive, body of the clones that are

instrumental to human beings causes considerable moral anxiety as it makes them aware of the selfish project of posthumanism that reduce the clones into unwitting scapegoats. In the novel, Kathy recalls that the guardians in Hailsham were troubled by the thought that clones could have physical relations with each other “because deep down they couldn’t quite believe we wouldn’t end up with babies” (46).

Ishiguro skilfully shows that the microcosmic canvas of Hailsham is ruthlessly insufficient to equip the clones to face reality. The isolated and insulating world of Hailsham obliterates the existence of the larger world outside, which requires the demeaning coexistence of humans and non-humans for the survival of the human race. Franklin, Lury and Stacey in their work *Global Nature Global Culture* introduce the term “panhumanity” to speak about the intermingling of technology and human existence. They discuss not only the interconnected web of relations between various species but also the “forms of xenophobic rejection of otherness” (26). The hovering vagueness in Hailsham, that conceals the unpleasant reality of the human world, coupled with the unsympathetic outside world that fails to accommodate the clones exacerbate their plight. Miss Lucy tells the clones in Hailsham that their hopes of leading a decent life will never be fulfilled as “none of you will go to America, none of you will be filmstars. And none of you will be working in supermarkets as I heard some of you planning the other day” (39). The incompatibility of the world of the clones and the world of human beings become discernible through the vocabulary used by the clones. The use of words like “possible” and “completed” to refer to the human beings after who the clones are modelled on and death denotes the incongruence of the two worlds(490).

The porous boundaries between the “dehumanised humans” and “rehumanized clones” does not guarantee conducive living conditions to the clones as they are still considered different. The subsequent attempts to vociferously assert the embodied identity of

the clones are shown through the unrelenting efforts of Miss Lucy, Miss Emily and Marie Claude to create a space that could be harmoniously shared by human beings and clones. In the novel, the clones are accorded only a secondary status in spite of the fact that the clones are fully conscious beings who have unquestionable control over their mental faculties, emotions and memories. Moreover, the “narrative agency” of the clones, despite the hierarchical relation between human beings and clones, becomes obvious as the whole novel unfolds as Kathy’s reminiscence (Oppermann 8). Not only does this radically destabilise the established anthropocentric notion that story telling is a unique human activity but it also reiterates the moral responsibility towards the “abhuman” category called clones (Nayar 110).

The shared spaces of coexistence coupled with the shared vulnerability of life forms create a moral panic. The inescapability of these precarious situations and the sympathetic understanding of their helplessness, that reduces the clones into excess and disposable population at the mercy of human beings, generate an anxiety due to the interchangeability of their soul roles. Judith Butler speaks about the necessity of empathising with the suffering of another person when she says “but if everyone could feel everyone else’s pain, who would torture? Who could cause anyone unnecessary pain? A biological conscience is better than no conscious at all”(102). Here, she elucidates the possibility of alleviating the pain of the suffering other if one could emotionally identify with the suffering other. The ostensible moral panic in the novel shows the indifference which allows the persistence of the clones’ unmitigated suffering. The unconcern that permeates the human disregard for the welfare of the clones can invalidate the claim that human beings possess superior emotional and intellectual ability. Hence, the inexplicable pain encountered by Tommy and Ruth after a trail of donations, the lurking possibility of death after each donation and the frightening uncertainty regarding the nature of death that is awaiting them are

eloquently conveyed when Tommy says “if you knew for certain you’d complete, it would be easier”(132).

In the novel, human perfectibility which is achieved at the cost of the clones hints at a one-sided technological advancements, which could ensure only cognitive enhancements, as the ability to identify with and alleviate the pain of the suffering other is beyond human reach. While the undeniable presence of “children demonstrably superior “ to human beings evokes a threatening fear in human beings, the guardians of Hailsham experience an emotional anguish on witnessing the inhumane treatment received by the clones with superior ability (125). This disillusionment is evident when Marie Claude remarks “all they now feel is disillusionment because we haven’t given them everything possible(126). The concern that the guardians of Hailsham has for the clones suggests the recognition that the clones deserve as much rights and recognition as human beings. Moreover, the actions initiated by Marie Claude, Miss Emily and the reaction of Miss Lucy on realising the abysmal plight of the clones suggest the acknowledgement of human dependence that accompanies the decentring of human beings. Though the creation of clones shows the enviable technological prowess and an acute intellectual capacity, the awareness that human perfection could be achieved only through an undue reliance on clones creates a feeling of radical inadequacy. The attribution of life and the consequent animation of the clones hurt the human conscience as they are unwilling to believe that such life forms, that are reared to satisfy human selfishness , actually exist. The separate existence of the human and non-human in two irreconcilably distinct territories, Hailsham and Norfolk, allays the prickling guilt that could potentially prompt one to retrospectively reconsider the inhumane circumstances that deter emotional development. Miss Emily later observes that it is the visible presence of the human clones as a living testimony to the unthinking economical progress that gnaws the human sense of propriety. Nevertheless, the agency commanded by the clones when they assume the role of

“storied matter” with complete authority over their narration, as evinced through the agential role commanded by Kathy as she narrates the encounter between the clones and the world outside, implies the move from anthropocentrism to post-anthropocentrism (Oppermann 7). The co-dependent existence of clones and human beings and the moral anxiety due to the unwarrantable treatment received by the clones insinuate the need to move towards “moral transhumanism” in order to enhance the emotional and moral capabilities of man (Nayar 22). Ishiguro’s novel *Never Let Me Go* attempts to transcend the traditional definitions of personhood by raising certain pertinent bioethical questions through the rehumanisation of cloned lives.

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